

Improving Work Performance Among Academic Staff Through Transformational Leadership: A Conceptual Analysis

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Abstract

Transformational leadership has become necessary in management practices. In people-oriented organizations, the overall performance may largely depend on leadership styles. Although a variety of studies have provided the possibility for a positive connection between transformational leadership and work performance, the advantages of transformational leadership in educational settings need to be further analyzed. Transformational leadership was shown to be effective in predicting various variables, including work performance, in different contexts. Transformational leaders in colleges and

universities are able to motivate the lecturers to go beyond expectations in pursuit of the vision of higher educational institutions. However, there is still a shortage of studies conducted at higher educational institutions. It is essential to examine the effectiveness of transformational leadership to align lecturers' behaviors with the goals of higher educational institutions. Under the social exchange theory, this paper reviews the connection between transformational leadership and work performance among academic staff at higher institutions. The implication of transformational leaders toward improving and maintaining a positive work environment is discussed.

Keywords: work performance, academic staff, transformational leadership, leadership styles, higher education institutions

1. Introduction

The academic environment and the systems of education help with the nation's competitiveness and sustainability. Efforts have been made by governments almost all over the world to improve the quality of education in their countries. As the most valuable resource, the academic staff are no doubt in high status, because they are the main workforce to achieve the goals of the colleges and universities. In addition to educating the students with knowledge of professions, lecturers also have to engage in such tasks as administrative affairs, guiding the students in their daily lives, and working overtime to prepare teaching materials (Johari et al., 2018). As a matter of fact, lecturers are held up as models and examples for the community, because they are considered not only intelligent but also diligent and hardworking.

Although lecturers are gaining academic and social benefits, the problems they face have been obvious, too. For example, measurement of the quality of teaching is no longer the only key performance indicator. Lecturers are required to carry out research and take on the responsibility of publishing. This would definitely promote the academic reputation of colleges and universities, but excessive competition may also lead to ethical risks (Cai & Wu, 2022). Since society is ever-changing, education has been among the key elements that are inevitably experiencing influential changes. Therefore, in order to obtain success and stay competitive, it is important for higher educational organizations to improve lecturers' work performance.

Work performance is the key to the realization of individual's contribution to the organization, and has been attracting much academic attention through the past century (Carpini et al., 2017). Scholars have made attempts to identify the concept of work performance. For example, since it is something that people do, it can be considered as individual behavior that can generate value for the organization (Campbell et al., 1993). Although often being viewed as a multi-dimensional concept, work performance primarily serves as a dependent variable in most areas of management and organizational behavior (Carpini et al., 2017). Considering the possible risk of confusion and complexity caused by different dimensions and constructs, this study is limited to the individual level of work performance.

Among the research attempts aiming at identifying relationships between different factors

and work performance, some ideas present the significant effect of leadership style (Li et al., 2020). Furthermore, there is ample evidence in the literature that in people-oriented organizations, the interactive relationship between leaders and subordinates has always been at the center of focus (Harris et al., 2009). Leaders influence their followers through various leadership styles. Transformational leadership has been proven to be among the styles that are effective in increasing work performance because transformational leadership aligns closely with the requirements of social transformation in terms of goals and visions. Therefore, in order to test the impact of people-oriented management (within the context of the higher educational institutions) on individual work performance, this study aims to examine the relationship between transformational leadership and individual work performance among lecturers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Transformational Leadership

Burns (1978) described the concepts of transactional leadership and transformational leadership. The differences between them are thus follows. Transactional leadership emphasizes the exchange of values, while transformational leadership tends to promote mutual benefits and development between the leaders and the followers. With an elaborated paradigm, Bass (1985) extended the idea of Burns (1978) and described transformational leadership as the leader's nurturance and vision, from which the subordinate's competence can be further developed. The employees are encouraged to not only devote effort to the achievement of normal goals but also to go further with extra effort to exceed expectations (Lai et al., 2020).

According to Bass (1985), there are four dimensions in the concept of transformational leadership. The first dimension is idealized influence. It can be comparable to transformational leaders' charismatic model, through which the followers perceive the leaders' values and visions. Second, inspirational motivation means that transformational leaders can convey visions to inspire followers toward the desired goals. The third dimension is intellectual stimulation. Transformational leaders exhibit intellectual stimulation when in the face of problems, they challenge the norms and are open to new ideas to solve problems, and even encourage their followers to do the same (Bass & Riggio, 2006). The last is individualized consideration. Leaders provide their followers with care and support.

In the educational area, Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) introduced transformational leadership into the reform initiatives in some developed countries for the restructuring of schools and found that transformational leadership positively influences teachers in various aspects. Later on, they proposed a theoretical framework with five key indicators of transformational leadership: 1) setting directions, 2) developing people, 3) redesigning the organization, 4) improving the instructional program, and 5) related practices (Leithwood & Sun, 2012). With much research effort devoted, transformational leadership theory has been applied, conveying the meaning that transformational leaders have the ability to improve the teachers' perception of school visions and support the development of the teachers towards the ultimate goal of the school (Thompson, 2020).

In practice, transformational leadership has been considered an important determinant of several variables. An empirical study conducted by Li et al. (2023) among hotel workers reveals the positive association between transformational leadership (both individual-level and group-level) with employee's cooperative voice. Moreover, transformational leadership has a positive effect on organizational innovativeness (Iddris, et al., 2022), individual innovative behavior (Awan & Jehanzeb, 2022), and work performance through the mediation effect of job satisfaction (Alwali & Alwali, 2022). Being consistent with the literature in the past, transformational leadership has been proven to have a positive influence on work engagement, and there is a partial mediation effect of promotion focus on the connection (Alamri, 2023).

2.2 Work Performance

High work performance has always been the source of the overall efficiency and productivity of an organization, thus making work performance a core concept (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Work performance is an important research focus in organizational behaviors, and has been viewed as a multi-dimensional concept. The specific meaning of work performance is still an open issue because it is possible that the concept and content of work performance may vary across different areas and occupations (Aguinis, 2013). Porter and Lawler (1965) claimed that work performance is the value, quality, or quantity of personal contribution of the employees that can be assessed with the achievement of organizational goals. Campbell et al. (1993) tried to define it as the observable things done by individuals to make achievements for the goals of the organization. Furthermore, Motowidlo (2003) proposed that work performance can be weighed by the contribution of organizational goals made by employees' behavior. Although the definitions of work performance vary, there has been a growing consensus of ideas that the work performance of individual employees is closely linked to the organizational goals.

The reason why it is difficult to define the concept of work performance is because work performance is a relevant abstract and thus latent construct with multiple dimensions. Murphy and Kroecker (1989) claimed that there are four dimensions of work performance: task behaviors, interpersonal behaviors, downtime behaviors, and destructive/hazardous behaviors. Borman and Motowidlo (1993) made a clear difference between task performance and contextual performance. Task performance focuses on the employee's proficiency with which the activities contribute to the "technical core". Contextual performance does not emphasize the technical core but refers to activities that can provide support to pursue organizational goals.

In addition, Campbell (1990) proposed eight dimensions for work performance: job-specific task proficiency, non-job-specific proficiency, written and oral communication, demonstrating effort, maintaining personal discipline, facilitating peer and team performance, supervision, and management and administration. Griffin et al. (2007) believed there are three major dimensions of work performance: proficiency, adaptiveness, and proactivity. After a comprehensive and systematic literature review, Koopmans et al. (2011) illustrated a heuristic framework to understand the construct of individual work performance. Afterwards, a

measurement instrument for work performance was developed with three dimensions: task performance, contextual performance, and counter-productive work behavior (Koopmans et al., 2014).

Previous studies found various antecedents of work performance across different industries. For example, soft skill acquisition and training methodology in Malaysian private companies significantly predict employee work performance (Ibrahim et al., 2017). During the pandemic of COVID-19, telework had different impacts on work performance in Greek public services, and information and communication technologies (ICTs) based on task-technology fit can make employees from different countries feel less lonely even when working at home and generate high performance in their tasks (Abelsen, et al., 2023; Varotsis, 2022). Researchers focusing on work performance in China are mainly from business schools of universities, with such hotspots of work performance research as work engagement, organizational identity, innovative performance, etc. (Liu & Liu, 2022). Ma and Zhang (2023) investigated the effects of work interruptions due to social media on work performance and found different mechanism paths, namely the enabling mechanism path and the burden mechanism path.

2.3 Transformational Leadership and Work Performance

The roles played by leaders and followers in the organization have always been essential elements. Transformational leadership thus has attracted attention as a dominant leadership theory for decades (Peng et al., 2020). Sürücü et al., (2022) consider transformational leadership as an important determinant of work performance. Literature has offered evidence that examining work performance embodied in the framework of transformational leadership theory is practical since employees are the followers who can be inspired by their transformational leaders in pursuing the goals of the organization.

In addition to theoretical potentials, several empirical studies have confirmed the positive relationship between transformational leadership and work performance. Based on combing through a good number of studies, Wang et al. (2011) indicated that transformational leadership can positively predict work performance across criterion types, with a stronger effect on contextual performance than on task performance. Transformational leadership is context-oriented and thus the studies focusing on transformational leadership need to be specific in the industries and nations. Hilton and some other researchers looked into the problems of the financial crisis in Ghana and found that transformational leadership shows a significant effect on the survival of banks in crisis (Hilton, et al., 2023). In public organizations, Fan et al. (2023) conducted research among civil servants at the municipal level in China and confirmed the positive effect of transformational leadership on service performance by constructing a dual-path mediating process.

Previous studies from the educational field have shown a positive relationship between transformational leadership and work performance. In Denmark, with a large sample of teachers and principals from high schools, the researchers distinguish between intentions of leadership and perceptions of leadership and find that only employee-perceived transformational leadership can significantly influence organizational performance (Jacobsen & Bøgh Andersen, 2015). By exhibiting morality and charm, school principals build a

positive influence on their subordinate teachers, and teachers are willing to work with extra effort to generate higher and better performance (Hou et al., 2023). Although a variety of studies focusing on the relationship between transformational leadership and work performance have provided the possibility for a positive connection, there is still a shortage of studies on the advantages of transformational leadership in promoting individual work performance in the context of higher educational institutions.

Since transformational leadership has become necessary in management practices, it is essential to examine how transformational leadership can serve as an effective means by which leaders can align their lecturers' behaviors with the visions and missions of their higher educational institutions. It is necessary to gain a deep understanding of the effect on the outcome variable of work performance. In addition, although qualitative methods in exploring and understanding more about the two concepts are still lacking, quantitative methods with empirical evidence are more needed.

Considering previous evidence in literature and empirical research, transformational leaders are able to convey a clear direction and set an example for the followers, this study proposes a hypothesis for testing:

Ha: There is a positive relationship between transformational leadership and work performance among lecturers.

2.4 Social Exchange Theory

The dimensions in the concept of transformational leadership imply the process through which the leaders lead the group by being role models, motivate the followers by conveying clear missions and goals, encourage creative ideas in problem-solving, and pay special attention to the needs of the individual followers. Taken together, it seems natural to expect higher work performance from the employees when they are motivated by a transformational leader. Under such circumstance, social exchange theory offers a better understanding about the relationship between transformational leadership and individual work performance. From the point of view by Homans (1958), the establishment of social relations is mainly dependent on people's own judgement of the cost and benefit. According to social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), the process of social exchange usually takes place when a supervisor acts positively or negatively towards a target individual. And then the target individual in turn behaves in a corresponding manner. The target individual who has received a specific action from the leader can in turn reciprocates this action with good or bad behaviors. Figure 1 shows the positive actions and repays. Therefore, when the followers feel care and support from the leader, they become more committed to the leader, and thus are more willing to go beyond and repay benefits with extra efforts.

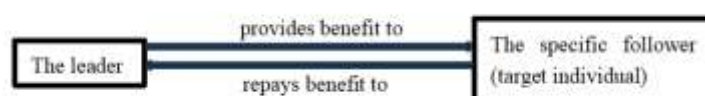


Figure 1. The general process of social exchange (positive actions and repays)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Since the main purpose is to test the relationship between transformational leadership and individual work performance, and whether transformational leadership can lead to an increasing of work performance among lecturers in China, it is preferable to adopt a quantitative research design. Pearson Product Moment Correlation is proposed to determine whether there is a significant relationship between the independent variable (transformational leadership) and the dependent variable (work performance). The data of this study will be mainly collected through questionnaire. In addition to electronic ones online, paper-based questionnaires are proposed to help guarantee the response rate.

3.2 Instrument

Transformational leadership. The Global Transformational Leadership Scale (GTL) developed by Carless et al. (2000) is used to measure the concept of transformational leadership. GTL contains 7 items, with a good value of Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.93$). Although GTL is a uni-dimensional instrument, it can capture all the aspects of transformational leadership. The lecturers are asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale with their perception of the transformational leadership style performed by their faculty dean.

Individual work performance. Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) is used to measure individual work performance of the lecturers working in the higher educational institutions. Developed by Koopmans (2014), IWPQ has overcome several limitations and offered a comprehensive measurement of individual work performance. The whole instrument contains 18 items, measuring 3 dimensions: task performance, contextual performance, and counter-productive work behavior. IWPQ has good consistency, with Cronbach's alpha at 0.78, 0.85, and 0.79 from the three dimensions (Koopmans, 2015).

4. Future Work

This study aims to reveal the relationship between transformational leadership and individual work performance among academic staff in higher educational institutions. It is hoped to confirm the positive influence of transformational on individual work performance. With the foundation laid by this study, the results and evidence can help with the development of further empirical studies on the connection between the two variables in practice.

5. Conclusion

Transformational leadership has been examined as a key concept by many researchers since it plays an important role in being antecedent. In people-oriented organizations, the overall performance may largely depend on the leadership styles. Transformational leadership has been confirmed to be effective in predicting various variables, including work performance, in different contexts.

Although previous research attempts have provided the basis for analyzing the relationship between transformational leadership and work performance, there are few of them focusing on all aspects of transformational leadership, or on every dimension of work performance.

The influence of transformational leadership on work performance may vary in different contexts, through different mechanisms. For example, it is feasible to establish improvement in work performance by transformational leadership through organizational commitment, since transformational leaders can increase the followers' psychological connection with the organization by means of communicating clear visions, leading by example, and provide intellectual stimulation (Sudha et al., 2023). Hence, there is still a large space for investigation of the connection between transformational leadership and work performance through mechanisms such as mediation and moderation.

Furthermore, much research takes place in the Western world or developed countries. There is still a shortage of research conducted in Asia with people from developing countries. Research in specific areas may help improve future research perspectives, leading to a deeper understanding of the effect of transformational leadership, especially in higher educational institutions. Transformational leaders in colleges and universities are able to encourage and motivate the lecturers to go beyond expectations, in pursuit of the vision of the higher educational institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to have visionary leaders with beneficial characteristics of transformational leadership to further inspire the academic staff and enhance work performance.

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